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ABSTRACT

"The Chronicles of Narnia" are a series of seven fairy tales written by C.S. Lewis that have become popular with both children and adults. Lewis points to five aspects of the fairy tale form that made the form suitable for expressing the images he saw. The aspects are: (1) no love interest; (2) no close psychology; (3) severe restraints on description; (4) flexible traditionalism; and (5) an inflexible hostility to all analysis, digression, and reflections. These characteristics of the fairy tale are also useful for oral interpretation since hearers do not want to bog down in excessive probing of the psyche, nor in detailed description, nor in digression. The Narnia tales also contain Christian moral-theological themes which are inherent to the stories. As a vehicle for the oral interpreter the books of Narnia are especially of interest because the stories are so capable of inspiring awe and devotion. (MKM)

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ORAL INTERPRETATION OF C. S. LEWIS' NARNIA TALES: A REFRACTING OF "PICTURES"

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General Background

> Narnia...the happy land of Narnia--Narnia of the heathery mountains and the thymy downs, Narnia of the many rivers, the plashing glens, the mossy caverns and the deep forests ringing with the hammers of the Dwarfs. Oh the sweet air of Narnia! An hour's life there is better than a thousand years in Calormen.[1]

Thus Bree the Talking Horse describes his native land which for millions of readers throughout our world has also become a very special place.

The Chronicles of Narnia are a series of seven fairy tales written by C. S. Lewis and published one a year between 1950 and 1956: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, Prince Caspian, The Voyage of the Dawn Treader, The Silver Chair, The Horse and His Boy, The Magician's Nephew, and The Last Battle. They cover Narnia's entire history (though not chronologically) from its spectacular and haunting creation to its last days and the beginning of what Lewis calls "Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before."[2] Through the pages romp British children who in Narnia become heroes, kings and queens, and friends of the Talking Beasts and other fantastic creatures, who have wondrous adventures at home and abroad, who learn the meaning of sacrifice, pain, thankfulness,

honor, and kindness, and who, above all, come to revere and love the great God-like Lion named Aslan.

Within a generation the Chronicles have become a publishing phenomenon. According to Walter Hooper, the American-born Anglican priest who served as Lewis' last secretary, the Narnian stories enjoyed instantaneous popularity with children. Then "parents read them to find out what all the 'fuss' was about, became converted, and pressed them on their friends."[3] One book, The Last Battle, was awarded the Carnegie Medal for the best children's book of the year.[4] Currently the books are selling annually over a million copies.[5] The first book has been adapted into both a radio script and an opera.[6] In colleges throughout our country students in myth and fantasy classes are delving into the series and going forth with a missionary zeal as if Narnia itself is the Promised Land and the Lion is more real than Christ. In every place I have spoken on C. S. Lewis, I have found those enthusiasts (and I am among them) who at the mention of "Narnia" show by face, eye, and sigh that they too have come under the enchantment of this master story-teller, one included by researcher Colin N. Manlove among the other English greats from 1830-1960--Thackeray, Kingsley, MacDonald, Nesbit, Williams, and Tolkien.[7]

By spring of 1979 the number of Narnian devotees will be greatly increased. During prime time CBS-TV will broadcast two hour-long animated specials based on The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe and produced through the joint effort of the Episcopal Radio-TV Foundation, Inc., the Children's Television Workshop,

and Kraft, Inc. William Beers, chairman and executive officer of Kraft, reports that this endeavor, the largest advertising and promotion campaign ever undertaken by his company, will include supplying educational materials to teachers and schools.[8]

"Pictures" in the Head

For the oral interpreter a concern more important than popularity of the literature is that of composition. What motivated the author to write and why did he choose one literary form over another? Answers to these questions go a long way in helping us to understand the material itself and the author's intention which too often is merely a speculative matter.

Fortunately, C. S. Lewis not only wrote stories but he also wrote about writing stories. In his essay "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's To Be Said," he explains invention in general:

> In the Author's mind there bubbles up every now and then the material for a story. For me it invariably begins with mental pictures. This ferment leads to nothing unless it is accompanied with the longing for a Form: verse or prose, short story, novel, play or what not. When these two things click you have the Author's impulse complete. It is now a thing inside him pawing to get out. He longs to see that bubbling stuff pouring into that Form as the housewife longs to see the new jam pouring into the clean jam jar. This nags him all day long and gets in the way of his work and his sleep and his meals. It's like being in love.[9]

Lewis further tells how in the case of his fairy tales "everything began with images; a faun carrying an umbrella, a queen on a sledge, a magnificent lion,"[10] images which crystalized in his first Narnian book.

Lewis adamantly denies that he selected material strictly for children, as he did not regard them as a "distinct race" but as human beings who with him and other adults share certain tastes.[11] "I put in what I would have liked to read when I was a child," he claims, "and what I still like reading now that I am in my fifties."[12] He declares axiomatically that "a children's story which is enjoyed only by children is a bad children's story. The good ones last."[13] Lewis himself confesses that not until his late twenties was he introduced to the enjoyment of Kenneth Grahame's Wind in the Willows and Edith Nesbit's trilogy about the Bastable family.[14] Adulthood does not dampen one's interest in children's stories, nor does youth automatically stimulate interest in them. Even as a child Lewis had found Arabian Nights disagreeable.[15]

We have seen, then, that for Lewis the creative process producing the Narnia Tales began with "pictures" in his head, or, as he says, a desire very like an itch.[16] No matter what manifestation this urge takes, be it "words pronounced in the head," "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," "spiritual compulsion," "a tide," or "a convergence of memories,"[17] the next step involves choosing a literary form adaptable to the ideas and feelings bombarding the author's mind. Lewis grasped on the fairy tale as the most suitable vehicle for expressing the images which "sorted themselves into events."[18] In an essay already quoted, "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's To Be Said," he explains his reasons.

Characteristics of the Form

Lewis points to five aspects of the fairy tale form: 1) no love interest, 2) no close psychology, 3) severe restraints on description, 4) its flexible traditionalism, and 5) its inflexible hostility to all analysis, digression, reflections, and "gas."[19] Each of these characteristics bears examination.

1) No love interest--Surely Lewis could not have meant this categorically, because many fairy stories have a romantic relationship at their core. "Beauty and the Beast" in which the poor deserted Beast almost dies for the love of his Beauty is a notable example. Another is "Snow White" whose magic sleep can only be broken by a prince's kiss. Rather, Lewis must have intended to convey that fairy tales have little love interest, as indeed is true of his series.

Note the way he handles the relationship between Shasta (Cor) and Aravis in The Horse and His Boy. The two met in their youth and shared many adventures while they were seeking refuge in the North where Cor discovered he was heir apparent to the Archenland throne. Lewis gives less than a paragraph to their "love story" and even then manages to dissipate all idyllic romance through his subtle humor:

> Aravis...had many quarrels (and, I'm afraid even fights) with Cor, but they always made it up again: so that years later, when they were grown up they were so used to quarrelling and making it up again that they got married so as to go on doing it more conveniently. And after King Lune's death they made a good King and Queen of Archenland and Ram the Great, the most famous of all the kings of Archenland was their son.[20]

Lewis likewise makes quick work of the romance between King

Caspian and Ramandu's beautiful daughter.[21]

2) No close psychology--In the fairy story, unlike the novel, the characters are not delineated in any great detail; they do not engage in any deep introspection and soul searching. There are no Anna Kareninas torn with jealousy or Cruals wracked by circumstances and inner turmoil. The characters are straightforward real and imaginary beings who work their way through problems without wallowing in strong emotions.

Still, the characters are anything but flat, for the fairy tale form allows the author to make pithy observations which cast light on the individual personalities and on human nature in general. Lewis is particularly adept at this and often puts a humorous edge on behavior. In The Voyage of the Dawn Treader, for instance, Caspian and his friends are confronted by a dragon. "They got up, all with swords drawn, and formed themselves into a solid mass with Lucy in the middle and Reepicheef on her shoulder," writes Lewis, and then he interjects a psychological point, "It was nicer than the waiting about and everyone felt fonder of everyone else than at ordinary times."[22] He does not give a long explanation of how task roles properly discharged often result in positive interpersonal feelings, but quickly, succinctly touches a psychological principle. Or in The Last Battle when those loyal to King Tirian are assembled on Stable Hill and facing insurmountable odds, Eustace makes a sensible statement. Then Lewis tells us, "Jill hated Eustace for saying it. He was fond of being dreadfully matter-of-fact when other people got excited."[23] In just a few words Lewis enables the

reader to understand the psychology of two characters.

3) Severe restraints on description--In Once upon a Time: on the Nature of Fairy Tales, Max Lüthi notes this aspect of the form:

> The fairy tale indicates the action and does not get lost in the portrayal of scenes and characters. In how many so-called "literary" fairy tales is a city which the hero enters lovingly described: the narrow streets, the picturesque corners and gables, and the murmuring fountains? In the genuine fairy tale, there is nothing of the sort.[24]

Taken at face value, Lüthi's stylistic bounds seem to exclude Lewis' stories from the "genuine fairy tale" category, because all seven books contain a fair amount of description. Unless someone is able to devise a formula for acceptable description limits, it remains impossible to know how much a book can contain without having excess.

I suggest that the reader himself is the final judge, for he is the one who will have to swim or flounder through it. Lewis seems to have developed a happy medium, for his descriptions directly aid the action. I, for one, do not find myself skipping them, but, on the contrary, I often reread passages of great strength and beauty. The creation of Narnia, for one, with its fluidity of space and sound has enough strength and poignancy to bring tears to the eyes.[25]

4) Its flexible traditionalism--While Lewis does not explicate what he means by "traditionalism," he most likely is referring to the archetypes found throughout the long tradition of this form. In the Narnian Tales we find traditional situations--coronations, court ceremonies, trickery, tests of

courage, battles, capture and release, long journeys, strange transformations; traditional objects--magic swords, potions, rings, fruit, horn, chair, spells; traditional beings--witches, dwarfs, satyrs, unicorns, Talking Animals, ogres, centaurs, dragons, monsters. The seven stories, while unique in themselves, have an unmistakable air of authentic fantasy, and the reader who has already gone through Grimm, Andersen, MacDonald, and the others knows that in Lewis he is home in fairyland, only more so, for reasons which should become clear later in this paper.

5) Its inflexible hostility to all analysis, digression, reflections, and "gas"--this fifth aspect of the form is almost a foregone conclusion, as a story which has strict limits on characterization and description is not likely to have much flatulence. Lüthi notes that whenever digressions are found in fairy tales they are "the unfolding of the story" and the "need to express relationships and feelings through external events and visible objects."[26]

Clyde Kilby, curator of the Marion E. Wade Collection which includes the C. S. Lewis Collection, feels that one lapse in the structural unity of the Narnia Tales is the appearance of the underwater people in The Voyage of the Dawn Treader.[27] My own opinion is that something had to take place on the last leg of the trip. The threatening sea people spurred the gallant Reepicheef to bolt into the water. This move led to his discovery that the water was sweet, signaling the fulfillment of an old prophecy and thus contributing

directly to furtherance of the action.[28]

Having looked at five characteristics of fairy tales, we might now inquire into the usefulness of this form for oral interpretation. The lack of love interest is a neutral factor, as it neither enhances nor detracts from the value of a piece. While love may make the world go round, as a theme it is not guaranteed to make hearers' heads spin; it is inherently no better than any other theme. But when characteristics 2 (no close psychology), 3 (severe restraints on description), and 5 (hostility to analysis, etc.) are considered, they immediately are perceived as benefits for the reader. Hearers do not want to bog down in excessive probing of the psyche, nor in detailed description, nor in digression. Action is more to their liking, and this is precisely what the fairy tale provides. The flexible tradition (point 4) brings well-known situations, objects, and beings within the imaginative grasp of the listeners, and many of the associations with words such as "castle," "knights," "crowns," and "swords" give rise to striking images, a decided advantage for the reader whose job it is to evoke meaning. Fairy tales as a type of prose reading are by their very form ideally suited for oral interpretation.

The Derivation of the Moral

From characteristics of the form we now turn to discuss the moral aspect. Rosemary Haughton in Tales from Eternity makes a case for finding Christian ethics and theology in fairy stories:

> The fairy-tales open up our understanding of what the Gospels tell us about human life, its meaning and destiny. We follow their themes and characters, and recognize their counterparts and echoes in every type of account of human experience, poetical, historical, mystical, and at last we come to this central assertion, which makes sense of all the rest, that man is destined to be united with Christ in the life of the resurrection. This is one assertion that only Christians can make and of course only those who are able to make this assertion can make this kind of sense of what fairy-tales tell us. The theology of the tales is not self-evident, and we cannot use it as any convincing argument to support or induce belief. But when faith is struggling to realize itself, and to see where to go, the stories provide a much needed renaissance of Christian language in which faith may understand its nature.[29]

This is in line with what Lewis felt, as revealed by Walter Hooper in an interview:

> All our books, and talk and so forth are, at best, only pointers--not the One pointed to? As a crucifix is a pointer, so Lewis hoped that his stories would serve as pointers. They carry our imaginations beyond the stories themselves to Something Else. I think his Narnian Chronicles do just that.[30]

Lewis took great pains to dispel the notion that he started with Christian moral lessons he wanted to teach and then made up stories to clothe the ideas. Nothing is farther from the truth; Lewis calls it "pure moonshine."[31] Instead, pictures should tell their own moral, one that comes from the whole fabric of the author's life, from his understandings where he finds them and works them out. "The only moral that is of any value is that which arises inevitably from the whole cast of the author's mind."[32]

In the case of the Narnian Stories, it was inevitable that Biblical parallels and Christian morality should seep in

from Lewis' mind. Through his writings and lecturing he was already established as an eminent apologist and expositor. Had he written nothing other than his Broadcast Talks (The Case for Christianity, Christian Behavior, and Beyond Personality), they alone would have been a sufficient theological basis to work into his fairy stories.

Therefore, it is not surprising that much of Christ's levity and seriousness, gentleness and terror, love and judgment has become embodied in Aslan, the magnificent Lion; or that the rites of death and resurrection are enacted at the Stone Table, with Aslan as the willing, substitutionary victim; or that Eustace becomes reborn, so to speak, when Aslan peels off his dragon skin; or that Susan by her own disbelief fails to enter the New Story of eternity. These moral-theological themes come in so gracefully that they never seem tacked on or pious; they are as inherent to the story as thread is to fabric and grain is to wood.[33]

The Additive Factor

Anyone who has become enamoured with a great work of art knows the experience of the plus factor. Rationality tells us that the prized object is merely composed of pigment, canvas, clay, marble, musical notations, wood, paper and print, as are many other things in our world. This object has no right to be so special, to flash sharp prickles into our deepest sensibilities, to thrust back our dark eye shades until through this one finely crafted piece we find the world and sky im-

mediately belonging, unified, meaningful. Our heads have been turned, our eyes widened, our hearts tugged at warmly. We see more than can be accounted for by sound waves and molecules.

A number of authors in The Bulletin of the C. S. Lewis Society of New York refer to the feeling evoked by the Narnia Chronicles. One is a Trappist monk who says in a letter:

> I've read them about three times in the last three years, and they have been for me about the most spiritual books I have read in my 16 years as a monk. They are just chuck full of insights into who God is, who we are, and how we relate to God and to one another. And it is all presented in such a wonderful, delightful and imaginative way that it really goes deep into your heart and whole being.[34][35]

John Morrison in "Obedience and Surrender in Narnia" writes:

> The Chronicles of Narnia maintain their link to reason and fact; they give the reader pleasure and understanding and present him with insights into the nature of his own condition, a condition which is always embraced by a greater love than he can intellectually conceive but which he can imaginatively and emotionally feel.[36]

This "more-than" factor, mysterious yet experiential, gathers inside us as a pleasurable longing. When reading the Narnia Tales this longing centers upon Aslan who comes and goes at his will. We find ourselves waiting for him as expectantly as the Narnians do, and when he is present, he stands as protector and judge also over us. With Edmund, Eustace, and Lucy we strain to see into Aslan's country beyond the end of the world and to know what Lucy means when she says of the experience, "It would break your heart."[37] Such yearning never breaks a heart, only begs for clearer insight to see and to feel more mystery.

Conclusion

The oral interpreter, then, has at his disposal the seven books of Narnia--full of "pictures" from Lewis' head, designed for children but also enjoyed by adults, exciting with fast-paced action, captivating even in description, theological in tone and basis, and capable of inspiring awe and devotion. From this material the interpreter receives the challenge of being a "sub-creator." This is Tolkien's expression for the role of the story-maker:

> He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is "true": it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside.[38]

If it be true that the author's role is to sustain the silent reader's belief in the Secondary World of fairy tales, then that task passes in line to the oral interpreter who has the same obligation for his hearers. He must as faithfully as possible bring the author's sub-creation to life. The mountains must reach cloudward, the glens must vibrate with bubbling streams, the Talking Beasts must chatter each on his own pitch and in his own dialect, the earth children must gain stature as rulers at Cair Paravel, and Aslan, dear Aslan, must flash goldenly and majestically in the Narnian sun.

To do this the interpreter must let himself fall under the spell of Aslan whose warm breath is both perfume and power and whose beckoning always leads "further up and further in."[39]

FOOTNOTES

[1]C. S. Lewis, The Horse and His Boy (New York: Collier Books of Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1970), p. 9.

[2]C. S. Lewis, The Last Battle (New York: Collier Books of Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1970), p. 184.

[3]Kathryn Ann Lindskoog, The Lion of Judah in Never-Never Land (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973), p. 13.

[4]This award is given annually to recognize the outstanding book for children written in English and published in the United Kingdom during the preceding year. The information source is Library Association, 7 Ridgmount Street, London WC1E 7AE, England.

[5]Lindskoog, p. 13.

[6]Myrna Grant, "A Radio Adaptation of The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe," Thesis Wheaton College, June 1971, and John McCabe, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe: an Opera (London: Novello & Co., Ltd.).

[7]Colin N. Manlove, "The Fairy Tale: and Its English Development, 1850-1960," Thesis Pembroke College, Oxford 1967, p. 1.

[8]Newsletter of the Episcopal Radio-TV Foundation, 18, No. 1 (January 1978), p. 1.

[9]C. S. Lewis, "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's To Be Said," in Of Other Worlds, ed. Walter Hooper, A Harvest Book (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1975), p. 35.

[10]Ibid., p. 36.

[11]C. S. Lewis, "On Juvenile Tastes," in Of Other Worlds, ed. Walter Hooper, A Harvest Book (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1975), p. 41.

[12]C. S. Lewis, "On Three Ways of Writing for Children," in Of Other Worlds, ed. Walter Hooper, A Harvest Book (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1975), p. 22.

[13]Ibid., p. 24.

[14]Ibid.

[15]"On Juvenile Tastes," p. 39.

[16]"Sometimes Fairy Stories," p. 36.

[17]These descriptions of the creative urge are found in The Creative Process, ed. Brewster Ghiselin, A Mentor Book (New York: The New American Library, 1955), pp. 110, 84, 114, 169, and 200. The book is a symposium offering insights on the conception and production of creative work in art, music, science, and literature. The quotations in this paper come from Amy Lowell, William Wordsworth, Stephen Spender, Dorothy Canfield, and Katherine Anne Porter, respectively.

[18]"Sometimes Fairy Stories," p. 36.

[19]Ibid., pp. 36-37. For a psychoanalytical approach to fairy tales, see Bruno Bettelheim, The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales (New York: Alfred A. Knopf), 1976.

[20]Horse, p. 216.

[21]C. S. Lewis, The Voyage of the Dawn Treader (New York: Collier Books of Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1970), p. 216.

[22]Dawn Treader, pp. 78-79.

[23]Last Battle, p. 94.

[24]Max Lüthi, Once upon a Time: on the Nature of Fairy Tales, trans. Lee Chadeayne and Paul Gottwald (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., Inc., 1970), p. 50.

[25]C. S. Lewis, The Magician's Nephew (New York: Collier Books of Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1970), pp. 98-102.

[26]Lüthi, p. 56

[27]Clyde S. Kilby, The Christian World of C. S. Lewis (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), p. 145.

[28]Dawn Treader, pp. 189-99.

[29]Rosemary Haughton, Tales from Eternity, A Continuum Book (New York: The Seabury Press, 1973), p. 167.

[30]"An Interview with Walter Hooper" in Eliane Aymard, "C. S. Lewis's Narnian Chronicles or on the Other Side of the Wardrobe Door," Thesis Universite de Toulouse, June 1967, Appendix.

[31]"Sometimes Fairy Stories," p. 36.

[32]"On Three Ways of Writing," p. 33.

[33]In The Longing for a Form, ed. Peter J. Schakel (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1977), p. 112, Walter Hooper expresses the same idea: "The tales are not, as might be imagined, built around moral themes which were in the author's mind from the beginning, but grew out of the telling and are as much a part of the narrative as scent is to a flower."

[34]J. R. R. Tolkien in "On Fairy-Stories," in Essays to Charles Williams, ed. C. S. Lewis (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1966), p. 75, says, "It was in fairy-stories that I first divined the potency of the words, and the wonder of the things, such as stone, and wood, and iron: tree and grass; house and fire; bread and wine."

[35]Br. Stanislas, "Excerpts from Letters," The Bulletin of the C. S. Lewis Society of New York, 7, No. 6 (April 1976), 18.

[36]John Morrison, "Conscience and Surrender in Narnia," The Bulletin of the C. S. Lewis Society of New York, 7, No. 12 (October 1976), 4.

[37]Dawn Treader, p. 212.

[38]Essays, p. 60.

[39]This phrase is Aslan's directive to those ushered into his country in The Last Battle. See chapter XV by that title.